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I-15 project moving forward, for less

Joe Pyrah - Daily Herald

As the economy swirls down the toilet bowl, Utah Valley residents can take heart: The cost of road construction is going down with it.

The Interstate 15 South project is again on track—for a billion dollars less than last year. The now-\$1.725 billion expansion will stretch from American Fork to Spanish Fork. The price is cheaper for a number of reasons, including lower interest rates, the lower price of materials and a lack of jobs elsewhere.

"Right now it looks like the bidding climate is in our favor. There's a lot of people hungry for work," said UDOT spokesman Nile Easton.

- The project will widen I-15 by two lanes in each direction between American Fork and Spanish Fork, a 50- to 66-percent increase in capacity.
- Many of the interchanges will be rebuilt or reconfigured, as will many bridges. Some of them aren't up to height standards, the result being that they're occasionally clipped by semitrailers.
- Depending on when the money is officially approved, UDOT could begin construction as early as spring 2010. The project will take four to five years to complete.

The expansion is just part of a \$3.4 billion bonding package for roads and buildings that will eat up about 85 percent of the state's bonding capacity. (State leaders don't like to go over that number though there is no statutory restriction.)

Sen. Lyle Hillyard, chairman of the executive appropriations committee, said roads don't have the benefit of a donor list to rely on for funding.

"We've let roads go for so long that we're really in a crisis situation," he said. "Roads don't have an alumni association to call."

Leadership from both houses and the Governor's Office fell into agreement on multiple issues Tuesday:

- Two buildings in Utah County will get funding. The MATC campus at Thanksgiving Point will get \$19 million for construction and UVU's new science and health building will get \$3 million for design.
- Higher education institutions will have the option of an 11-day furlough, much like the rest of the state is contemplating. That works out to two hours a week.
- The state's two rainy day funds -- \$414 million and \$100 million for education -- won't be touched through 2010. Instead, \$1.7 billion in federal stimulus money will be used to backfill much of the cuts made this session.
- Even with the backfill, public education will be cut 6 percent and higher education 9 percent for 2010.
- The state's 1.5 percent contribution to employee 401(k) will likely be cut in half or cut entirely. There is still debate on this, as it would affect all employees and have myriad consequences.
- There remains \$37 million in the governor's portion of discretionary stimulus spending. Wish lists are being compiled.

- The "revenue enhancements" to fill state coffers currently agreed on are a \$20 a year increase for vehicle registration, and increases for some agriculture and court fees. While tax increases for tobacco, food and gas are still on the table.